

Which of the tools of good works would St Benedict have recommended in particular to students in a 21st century Benedictine school?

By Aran O'Grady (Glenstal Abbey School, Limerick)

"Listen, my child, to the master's precepts".... These stirring words are the encouraging welcome to the Rule of St Benedict. Many scholars regard it as one of the fundamental doctrines of Western civilisation and it has always had an influence even beyond the walls of the cloister. A brief examination of the bookshop in any monastery shows how people have attempted to apply this 'life-giving way'¹ to very different situations. It is possible to do 'business with Benedict'², apply his insights to parenting³ and even to be a monk without leaving your day job. In particular, the tools of good works in Chapter 4 are something of an essential guide to living as a member of these monastic enclosures, or even life itself. Benedict's main aim with the tools, according to his Rule, translated by Justin McCann, was to provide a way of maintaining stability in the community, the workshop. What I seek to explore in this essay is how the insights of the Rule, particularly those described in the tools of good works, can be put into practice in a 21st century Benedictine school.

However, the 21st century is radically different from the sixth, not only due to industrial and technological improvements, but also to social changes. This is true for St Benedict too, as in his Rule he encourages corporal punishment for the monks and youths who need discipline. However this is not the case in 21st century schools in the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland, where corporal punishment is illegal and frowned upon.⁴ This example shows we must take heed of the time difference in following the Rule of St Benedict. While Benedict could not foresee the circumstance of students in a 21st century Benedictine school following his Rule, or indeed that there be students living in a conventual community at all, there are a number of tools he would certainly have recommended to them.

1 Esther De Waal, *A Life-Giving Way: A Commentary on the Rule of St. Benedict*, Harper Collins(1995)

2 Kit Dollard, *Doing business with Benedict: the Rule of St Benedict and Business Management : A Conversation*, Continuum, 2002

3 Dwight Longenecker, *Listen, My Son: St Benedict for Father*, Gracewing (2000)

⁴ School Standards and Framework Bill (UK 1998), Ireland 1982

We must therefore distinguish between a monastic enclosure and an educational institution such as a secondary school. This is because 21st century schools, whether public or private, are generally more affected by the outside world and to a certain extent the pupils must balance their education, with its Benedictine ethos, at school with their own activities when they are at home, such as their social lifestyle and family. For this reason the tools of good works must be adapted so as to better suit the position of students in schools. Of course I speak from my own experience in a particular Benedictine school, as others may differ.⁵ Some students, especially in the 21st century, may not have the same religious background or tendencies as others, or they may not have as great a belief in God as other pupils, or they may have varying personal difficulties to others. So it is necessary to be subtle when recommending the tools to them.

The first of seven tools of good works which I believe St Benedict would have recommended is: “*Not to steal*” (4:1)⁶. Simple yet effective, it represents the plight of thousands of schools around the world in which some students take things which do not belong to them from other students. It is difficult to monitor and to find culprits, and so this tool of good works deters students from stealing not just because of the punishment, such as detention or expulsion, which it incurs but also because it goes against the established Rule of a Saint whose main aim was to create a stable environment for the people trying to maintain the lifestyle he encouraged. So the ‘thief’ feels that his or her behaviour is a detriment to the school rather than simply a nuisance.

“*Not to do to another what one would not have done to one-self*” (4:1) is an instantly recognisable phrase taught by Jesus Christ and it is understandable why St Benedict would have included it in his tools for good works five hundred years later. In a school each student has a solid idea of how he/she should be treated: be popular among peers, not to be insulted and have their belongings and their person respected, but it is often the case that some people do not have the same regard for others’ desire to be treated similarly. This lies at the root of bullying, teasing and mocking between students in a school. For this reason there is the tool to say that no-one should treat another person

⁵ For example Glenstal Abbey is an all-boys school whereas other Benedictine schools are mixed, so the conditions of these schools and how the Benedictine ethos is applied may be different

⁶ Numbers in brackets refer to chapters and verses in the Rule of St Benedict.

in a way that they would not like to be treated. It is straight-forward and presents a perfect image of how students should behave towards each other.

The school environment can be a difficult one to be in, especially in a boarding school, as students can sometimes become homesick, among other things. “*To console the sorrowing*” (4:1) is a very useful tool for this reason. It is very constructive and helpful to the workshop when a student can console one of his fellow pupils if they are troubled by anything. Of course there is usually a school chaplain available in 21st century Benedictine schools⁷, but often just a few words of consolation from a friend can be enough to restart someone to a state of relief and emotional stability.

St Benedict would have seen it as important that students in a 21st century Benedictine school would “*keep constant guard over the actions of one’s life*” (4:3). This is because every single public action taken by an individual has an effect on his/her environment. Saying something rude to a teacher, or not doing prescribed homework has a negative effect on the workings of the classroom and interferes with its progress, and this is exactly what St Benedict is trying to avoid by encouraging students to use the tools of good works in their main workshop, the classroom. By extension, the Rule of St Benedict wants students to hand up their homework on time and to treat teachers with respect, and by these actions maintain a positive work ethic in the whole community.

The tool: “*To know for certain that God sees one everywhere*” (4:3) can be applied to any student, even those who do not have great faith in God, as it represents the fact that, in tandem with the previous tool, everything one does influences one’s surroundings and nothing goes unnoticed. A student who excels academically is held in high regard among staff as they contribute greatly to the school. A student who is kind and obliging to all monks and lay people working in the school is regarded equally well as they promote healthy relations between everyone around them. The awareness of this tool allows students to see what they themselves impart to the world around them.

Reconciliation is a fundamental tool in schools as the pressure of exams and the desire to be elsewhere can be a cause of great tension between students. For this reason, “*To make peace with an adversary before the setting of the sun*” (4:4) is quite a

⁷ Glenstal Abbey’s chaplain role is to “provide support in times of difficulty”

powerful instrument. It shows the importance of instigating peace with one's less favourite peers as it is not good for the morale or atmosphere of the workshop when two of its members are in harmful or violent disagreement with each other. No matter how bothersome it may be to bury the hatchet and make amends with your enemy, it is necessary for the stability of the workshop.

The final tool of good works, which it is undeniable that St Benedict would have recommended most highly to students in a 21st century school Benedictine school, is the last of his list of the 73 described in the Rule. "*To never despair of God's mercy*" (4:4). Interpretation is needed here, I think. Here it means that "Benedict wants that we keep trying. Failures and all. Pain and all. Fear and all. The God of mercy knows what we are and revels in weakness that tries."⁸ In the context of a school, this means that the students should try their best as that is all that is expected of them. They do not have to be superior in any way, or outdo any of their peers. What matters is that they do everything to the best of their ability and know that if they are doing this then they need not worry or lose faith in themselves or their God.

Thus we have 7 tools of good works, which I believe St Benedict would have recommended in particular to students in a 21st century Benedictine school. It is, in a way, a 7-Step guide to fulfilling the ethos that a Benedictine school encourages in its students. The Rule says "*Behold these are the tools of the spiritual craft*" and this is very relevant to the modern age. It has been reported that there is an increased sense of spirituality than religion in the 21st century⁹, however this is not a negative thing as it can be further deduced that a religious education, in this case a Catholic one, can work towards great spiritual development in an individual.

The main difference between a Benedictine monastery and a Benedictine school is that, whereas the monks tend to stay in the enclosure for the majority of their lives, the students eventually depart to begin the next stage of their lives, whether it is a university or a workplace. With them, they can take not only what they have learnt in school, but also what they gained from being formed by the Benedictine ethos. This is

⁸ Joan Chittister OSB *The Rule of Benedict: a spirituality for the 21st century*, revised edition, Crossroad Publications (2010).

⁹ Survey: 72% of Millennials 'more spiritual than religious' http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2010-04-27-1Amillfaith27_ST_N.htm

what St Benedict would have wanted for them; they could be respectful, self-less and confident people who will bring this unique way of life and work with them. “If we employ them unceasingly day and night, and in the Day of Judgement render account of them, then we shall receive from the Lord the rewards which he himself has promised.” This, I believe, is what the ‘slow-release miracle’¹⁰ of the Benedictine way of life is all about: The students live by this guide diligently and they will realize, when what they view as their ‘Day of Judgement’ comes, the benefits of doing so. St Benedict does not just recommend a number of tools of good works; he recommends a way of life for these students in the hopes that they will become better human beings, who by their actions will help construct what Cardinal Basil Hume described as: a civilisation of love.

¹⁰ Andrew Nugent OSB *The Slow-Release Miracle: A Spirituality for a Lifetime* (Dublin: The Columba Press 2006)